

# WALKPEOPLE INVAD

BY WALTER SHAPIRO

**W**e have entered the age of the urban hermit. Gone from the streets are those generous souls lugging their enormous electronic music boxes who would eagerly share their love of Donna Summer with total strangers. In their place are the self-contained music-misers of the '80s, each with featherweight earphones and a Walkman clipped to his high-fashion belt. The smug satisfaction on their blissed-out faces conveys a silent message: "I'm listening to Bruce Springsteen, and you're listening to the roar of a Metrobus."

Now, I don't like jackhammers and other street noises any more than the next person, but there is something alarming about a street filled with well-dressed people each marching to his own silent drummer and bass player. Roller skates and jogging suits could be dismissed as mere fads, but the Walkman is more insidious, a potent symbol of an antisocial electronic future.

In the months ahead, Walkpeople will become a literal silent majority. Even now, they pass through supermarkets oblivious to the Muzak thoughtfully provided for their shopping enjoyment. Soon, Walkpeople will begin to pop up at the Kennedy Center, silently protesting being dragged to the opera by listening instead to their Willie Nelson tapes.

Organized religion will not escape the growing contagion. Impious teen-agers will thrill to Olivia Newton-John singing "Let's Get Physical" in the midst of Sunday morning sermons on the virtues of chastity.

The Japanese may manufacture the Walkman and most of its lower-priced competitors, but American entrepreneurs will soon find ways to horn in on the action. Any day now, an abandoned disco in southern California will be transformed into a Walkroom. No need to

provide a band or even piped-in music; a dance floor and a bartender who knows sign language will suffice.

Just imagine the silent bedlam on the dance floor. Couples wearing matching Ralph Lauren earphones gyrating to totally different music. A man might be following the clarion call of the New Wave, while his erstwhile partner might be boogeying to the sounds of the Texas Two-Step.

A Walkroom may offend the sensibilities of traditionalists who were reared on Regine's and disco fever, but at least its patrons will have actually left their own homes for the joys of communing—albeit silently—with other members of the species. Nevertheless, this tribal sense of togetherness inevitably is doomed by economic realities. Eventually even the Walkpeople will disappear from the streets, falling prey to

sharp price drops in the cost of video cassette recorders, video discs, electronic television games and home computers.

Each of these products offers an updated version of Fortress America. Never again will there be a need to venture out onto dark, dangerous streets in quest of an antidote to boredom. Now your home (protected, of course, by a computer-controlled security system) can be your castle as you and your family emulate Howard Hughes.

Why eat \$3 popcorn at the movies when you can sit in the privacy of your own home and watch "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" for the 23rd time? Why expose your offspring to the germs and bad habits they can pick up from other children when the little tykes can play electronic pinball with their Atari? Why go through all the bother of shaving and

dressing for work when you can sit in your underwear and lift flagging American productivity by punching in a few commands on your own Apple computer?

Pop psychology tells us that self-reliant lives are wonderful, but there are a few minor sociological problems with this brave new homebound world.

Are movies really better than ever when you've seen them so often that you can lip-sync the dialogue? Without lifting the incest taboo, how can the human race reproduce itself if your children never want to leave home and learn bad habits? And if everyone works at home computer terminals, who will be left to spread the office gossip of tomorrow?

Electronic bleeps and blips will become the dominant sounds of the 21st century. Already the theme music from

Pac Man is heard more often than the "Brandenburg Concerto." But do not fear: a truncated form of spoken English will survive, thanks to the coming generation of talking computers.

It is ironic that all these epic breakthroughs will destroy our need to talk with one another. No longer will the typical American family—Mom, Dad, Jason and Heather—sit around the living room discussing Kierkegaard or telling knock-knock jokes. Instead, there will be silent exchanges of the latest cassette cartridges and computer game chips. Fortunately, dedicated raconteurs will be able to purchase home computers with a built-in supply of canned laughter.

In a world of home computers, video recorders and multi-channel cable television, the urban hermits of tomorrow will lose the shared experiences that make conversation possible.

Time, for example, will become relative. Real time, charted by the biological aging process, will give way to video time, as everyone will be years behind, drowning in a sea of unabsorbed information. It will be like going on a long vacation and then coming home and trying to read all the accumulated magazines stuffed in your mailbox.

No one will even be able to talk sports, that lowest common denominator of social chitchat, especially among strangers. Say you encounter your son, pallid and bleary-eyed from long hours hunched over the computer terminal, coming out of the bathroom on a beautiful spring day in 1992. You'd love to chat man-to-man about the 1989 Super Bowl, which you finally saw that morning, but you discover that he's still stuck back in game two of the 1987 World Series.

Skeptics may scoff at these dire images of the electronic future. So be it. The computer terminal on which I wrote this informs me that I've run out of space.



By Loel Barr